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Where is the exit? Intergenerational ambivalence and relationship quality in high contact ties

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ABSTRACT

We challenge the common idea that solidarity has positive, whereas conflict has negative implications, by investigating intergenerational ambivalence – defined as the co-occurrence of solidarity and conflict – and relationship quality. We use representative data on non-coresident adult children and parents with high levels of contact (weekly or more; $N = 2{,}694$ dyads). Results show that over half of high contact parent–child ties can be characterized as ambivalent and of high-quality. The likelihood of negative instead of positive ambivalent ties is greater if adult children have few exit options because they are socially isolated or have a small number of siblings. Ties between fathers and sons, and those between caring daughters and aging parents also have a high probability of belonging to the negative ambivalent type.

Introduction

Although family life is programmed for positive interactions – cooperation, love, mutual support, and happiness – the probability of negative interactions is also high (Sprey, 1969). It is surprising, though, that in previous research on intergenerational relationships the focus has been either on solidarity or conflict. Moreover, different features of solidarity (Komter & Vollebergh, 2002; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and conflict (Clarke, Preston, Raksin, & Bengtson, 1999) have mostly been examined in isolation of one another. Recently, a number of researchers have taken on the challenge of simultaneously investigating solidarity and conflict in an attempt to unravel the complexities of adult child–parent bonds (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1996; Katz, Lowenstein, Phillips, & Daatland, 2004; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006; Ward, 2008).

In this study, we expand on this work by questioning the notion that solidarity generally has positive, whereas conflict generally has negative implications for relationship quality. Empirical studies have proven otherwise. Solidarity can be "too much" because the provision of support is too burdensome, for example, or because the receiver is insufficiently able to reciprocate (Lincoln, Taylor, & Chatters, 2003; Silverstein, Chen, & Heller, 1996). In addition to causing damage, conflict can be a constructive element in close relationships (Coser, 1956; Simmel, 1904). A certain balance between pushes and pulls, between positive and negative interactions, contributes to the highest relationship quality (Rook, 2001). To unravel this "certain balance", and to understand why some adult child–parent ties are of a poor quality, whereas others represent strong bonds, we propose to combine the solidarity/conflict model with the concept of intergenerational ambivalence (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Lowenstein, 2007).

Positive and negative ambivalence

Research on ambivalence has increased the understanding of the co-occurrence of positive and negative interactions in parent–child bonds (Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004). Ambivalence is usually defined as having mixed feelings about the relationship. In our conceptualization of ambivalence, we take into account what parents and children actually *do*. We consider

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the co-occurrence of solidarity and conflict as a behavioral manifestation of intergenerational ambivalence (Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). Interestingly, in almost all studies on intergenerational ambivalence, it is assumed but not empirically investigated that ambivalence is associated with problems and poor relationship quality. (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004; Lang, 2004; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). We think that some ambivalent ties can be associated with high and others with poor relationship quality.

Studies on ambivalence tend to either focus on specific age groups, such as frail parents (Lang, 2004; Spitze & Gallant, 2004; Willson et al., 2003), specific ties such as those between coresidents (White & Rogers, 1997) or mothers and children (Pillemer & Suitor, 2002), or specific events such as when young adults come out gay or lesbian (Cohler, 2004). Moreover, sample sizes tend to be small. In our view, the focus on small, specific samples hampers the development of a general understanding of the association between ambivalence and relationship quality. Therefore, we use a large, representative sample.

Our research question is: which conditions increase the likelihood that intergenerational ambivalence is associated with high, rather than poor relationship quality? We consider *negative ambivalent* relationships as ties in which solidarity and conflict are combined with poor relationship quality. *Positive ambivalent* relationships are ties, in which solidarity and conflict are combined with high relationship quality.

Exit options

We start from the assumption that ambivalence, the co-occurrence of solidarity and conflict, is associated with a poorer relationship quality, if the interactions between parents and adult children are not so much the result of free decision making, but rather of a lack of exit options (Komter, 2001; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Smelser, 1998). We will formulate hypotheses about the probability of a *negative*, instead of a *positive ambivalent* relationship in connection with the adult child's exit options. We argue that the child's exit options are a function of the (a) the personal ability to see exits, (b) the availability of exits, (c) the normative barriers against exits, and (d) the blockage of exits.

Hypotheses

People who lack assertiveness are more likely to feel trapped in a given situation than those who have little difficulty standing up for themselves and making important decisions in their lives (Sincoff, 1990). Less assertive adult children are less able to negotiate intimate connections with others. Such individuals have fewer options to exit, manage or reshape their relationships with others. On the basis of these considerations we arrive at our first hypothesis: *a higher probability of a negative ambivalent relationship coincides with a decreasing personal ability to see exits*.

Alternative contacts are important determinants for parent–child contact and support (e.g., Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993). If the child is socially isolated, that is, if the child has a less satisfying social network, he or she is more dependent on the bond with the parent, and has fewer exit options from the relationship. This brings us to our second hypothesis: *a higher probability of a negative ambivalent relationship coincides with a decreasing availability of exits*.

People differ in the extent to which they feel responsible for contributing to the well-being of family members (Finch, 1989; Pyke, 1999). Perceived family obligations reduce the exit options from relationships in which the demands are too much or the interactions insufficiently rewarding. Following this reasoning, we formulate our third hypothesis: *a higher probability of a negative ambivalent relationship coincides with stronger normative barriers against exits*.

Objective circumstances such as sibship size and geographic distance also structure exit options. Adult children in large families experience fewer parental demands than in smaller ones (Dykstra & Knipscheer, 1995; Spitze & Logan, 1991; Uhlenberg & Cooney, 1990). Firstly, parents must divide their time and energy over a larger number of offspring, and secondly, children can share responsibilities toward their parents with siblings. Therefore, having more siblings means having more exit options. Living nearer to the parents enhances the opportunity to exchange support and reduces potential strains associated with parental care giving (McCulloch, 1995; Tomassini, Wolf, & Rosina, 2003; White & Rogers, 1997). Nevertheless, exit options are limited when the homes of the parent and the child are only separated by a short geographic distance. One can less easily “escape” from one another. Following these considerations we arrive at our fourth hypothesis: *a higher probability of a negative ambivalent relationship coincides with a greater blockage of exits*.

High contact ties

To test the theoretical arguments distinguishing poor from high quality ambivalent ties, we focus on adult children who report a relatively high face-to-face contact frequency with their parents, i.e., children who see their parents at least on a weekly basis. The focus on face-to-face contact is guided by the consideration that relationships between individuals are maintained and cemented by actual interaction (Dykstra, 1990). Duck (1983, p. 102) argued that “the activities *are* the relationship, and require the work, time, effort, attention, and skills of the partners”. Both as the provision of support (Mangen, Bengtson, & Landry, 1988) and the occurrence of practical disputes and irritations (Clarke et al., 1999) are strongly dependent on face-to-face encounters. High contact frequency increases the likelihood that relationships between parents and their adult children are characterized by ambivalence (Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006).

High contact intergenerational ties are not necessarily high quality ties (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Despite having a poor relationship, adult children might visit their parents often because they feel a normative obligation to do so. In our view, the focus on high contact ties will not leave us with insufficient variation to answer our research questions.

Method

Data

The data are from the public release file of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), a large-scale survey on the nature and strength of family ties in the Netherlands (Dykstra

et al., 2005). Between 2002 and 2004 computer assisted personal interviews were held with over 8150 men and women aged 18 to 79 who form a random sample of adults residing in private households in the Netherlands. Approximately five percent of respondents were non-native Dutch, meaning that both parents were born outside the Netherlands. The response rate was 45% which is comparable to that of other large-scale family surveys in the Netherlands (see Dykstra et al., 2005). In the present study, the data were weighted to make them better representative of the Dutch population aged 18–79 (with the exception of the multivariate analyses). We restricted the analysis to the 2694 adult children who had face-to-face contact at least weekly with their parents: 51% of all parent–child dyads in the NKPS. If both parents met the criterion of weekly contact, one was selected randomly for incorporation in the analysis. The interview data were supplemented with information from self-completion questionnaires, for which a response rate of 92% was obtained.

Analysis

Latent Class Analysis (LCA) is a technique that lends itself to the analysis of response patterns such as the co-occurrence of solidaristic behaviors and conflict. In LCA one assumes probabilistic rather than deterministic relationships between the latent construct and manifest indicators (the measures actually used) (Hagenaars & Halman, 1989). One basic principle of LCA is local independence, which means that associations between manifest indicators exist only insofar they measure the same latent construct. In the present analysis the latent construct is the co-occurrence of solidarity and conflict. LCA has the advantage that the categories of the latent construct are discrete and need not be ordered along a continuum (Clogg, 1995). Each dyad has a probability set of belonging to the identified latent classes depending on its response pattern. We use the program Latent GOLD 4.0, developed by Vermunt and Magidson (2005).

To investigate the conditions that increase the likelihood of one class over the other, we applied multinomial logit regression analysis (Liao, 1994), which is an extension of the binary logit model. The multinomial logit model (MNLM) is appropriate because the categories of the dependent variable (i.e., types of child–parent relationships) are discrete, nominal and unordered. With n categories, the MNLM is roughly equivalent to performing $2*(n-1)$ binary logistic regressions. In the MNLM all the logits are estimated simultaneously, which enforces the logical associations among the parameters and makes a more efficient use of the data (Long, 1997). To interpret the MNLM results, we estimated marginal effects (Bartus, 2005; Liao, 1994). The marginal effect gives the change in probability by one unit change in an explanatory variable when all other variables are held constant at sample mean values. For example, the marginal effect for a dummy variable is the difference between being in Category 1 and being in Category 0. Per variable the marginal effects sum up to zero.

In the analyses focusing on positive versus negative ambivalence, logistic regression was applied. Whereas MNLM is appropriate for analyses involving a range of parent–child types, logistic regression is appropriate in analyses where contrasts between two specific parent–child types are the focus of attention.

Analyzing ambivalence, Fingerman et al. (2004), and Willson et al. (2003) found that daughters experience more ambivalence than do sons. Compared to men, women have fewer options not to act in accordance with normative obligations to care for family members (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). For example, female adult children of frail parents might feel obligated to support, and at the same time feel strained by such responsibility (Lang, 2004). Elderly parents might be caught between the wish to be autonomous, and the reality of being dependent on children (George, 1986; Spitze & Gallant, 2004). Given these considerations, we conducted separate logistic regression analyses for daughters and sons, as well as for different age groups of the adult children (between 18–35, 36–55, and 56–79).

Measures

Solidarity, conflict, and relationship quality

The input for LCA is a cross-classification table of the scores for each variable in the analysis. It is customary to use dichotomous variables (cf. Hogan et al., 1993; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Though dichotomization implies a loss of information, it ensures having a manageable number of cells in the data matrix. An analysis on the basis of eight dichotomous measures, for example, results in 2^8 or 256 cells. Using all answer categories would produce unacceptably sparse data.

The following *solidarity* measures were used. Four variables for the exchange (received and given) of housework — such as preparing meals, cleaning, fetching groceries, doing the laundry — and practical matters — such as chores in and around the house, lending things, transportation, moving things — were used. The answer categories were dichotomized in (1) once or twice/several times and (0) not at all. To assess *conflict*, the question was asked: "Have you had any conflicts, strains or disagreements with [the target parent] in the past 3 months?" Answer categories were not at all, once/twice, and several times. Two dichotomous measures were constructed for conflicts over personal issues and conflicts over material issues, with (1) once, twice or several times and (0) not at all. *Relationship quality* was an ordinal measure of the adult child's overall evaluation of the relationship with the parent, scaled from 0 through 3, as an answer to the question: "Taking everything together, how would you describe the relation with your child/father/mother: not great (0), reasonable (1), good (2), or very good (3)?"

Exit options

(1) The *personal ability* to see exits is measured by an assertiveness scale of 4 items from 0 through 16, for example, "I stand up for myself", and "I can cope with anything" ($\alpha = .82$), obtained from the child's written questionnaire (missing set to the mean).

(2) The *decreasing availability* of exits relates to the extent of social isolation, measured by the loneliness scale, developed by De Jong-Gierveld and Kamphuis (1985). Six negatively formulated items express feelings of desolation and of missing an attachment relationship. An example of such an item is "I often feel rejected". Five positively formulated items express a sense of

belonging. For example, "There are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems". The positive items were reverse coded. Scale scores range from (0) not socially isolated to (11) extremely socially isolated ($\alpha = .84$).

(3) The *normative barriers* against exits are measured by a scale for perceived family obligations. This measure is a seven-item scale, with scores ranging from 0 through 28. Examples of scale items are: "Children should look after their sick parents", and "Parents should support their children if they need it" ($\alpha = .80$). A higher score indicates stronger views that family members should look after one another when necessary.

(4) The *blockage of* exits is measured by (a) the number of siblings and (b) geographic distance, which are continuous variables. Geographic distance is measured in kilometers and determined on the basis of the postal codes of the child's and parents' addresses. In the Netherlands postal codes refer to relatively small spatial units (e.g., the first ten houses on one side of a street).To avoid heteroskedasticity, geographic distance was logged (cf. Silverstein, 1995).

Controls

We control for factors that influence relationship quality in adult parent–child ties in general. The first is the *marital history of the parent*. Parental divorce has often been found to be associated with poor quality family relationships (Fischer, 2004; Hansagi, Brandt, & Andréasson, 2000). Dummy-variables were constructed to distinguish whether the parent had an intact marriage, had remarried, or was living alone. *Parental conflict during childhood* is a second factor. It has been shown that children who have experienced many negative events during childhood have less rewarding relationships with their parents in adulthood than others (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998). The measure we used is a scale of 0 through 10 ($\alpha = .78$), based on five questions on parental tensions and conflicts during childhood, from "How often did your parents have heated discussions?" to "How often did your parents live apart for a while?" Answer categories were (0) never, (1) once or twice, and (2) frequently. The third measure is *family cohesion*. The more cohesive the family as a group, the higher the quality of its relationships (Hechter, 1987; Homans, 1958). This measure is a scale of four items from 0 through 16, for example, "The ties between members of my extended family are tightly knit" ($\alpha = .85$).

We control for a number of other socio-demographic characteristics of the adult child. *Partner status* of the child is dichotomized in (1) whether or (0) not the adult child has a partner. We also control for *parental status*: the child (1) has children or (0) not. In case of *non-response* to the self-completion questionnaire, we imputed the means of the measures for assertiveness, social isolation, perceived family obligations, and social cohesion. To check for systematic bias, we controlled for the 8% non-response.

Results

Descriptive analyses

Descriptive information on the parent–child dyads in the sample (high contact ties) is presented in Table 1. As the table shows, the dyads are unevenly distributed by gender: There are relatively few sons (43%) and fathers (33%). The average number of siblings is 2.58. The mean distance separating children and parents is almost 11 kilometers. The adult children in our sample are on the average 38 years old. More than half of the adult children have parents with an intact marriage.

Table 1
Description of the sample ($N = 2694$).

	M	SD	Range
Exit options			
Assertiveness	11.87	2.29	0–16
Social isolation	2.35	2.55	0–11
Family obligations	14.86	4.26	0–28
Number of siblings	2.58	2.09	0–17
Geographic distance (km)	10.93	26.09	0–224[a]
Male	.43		0–1
Reporting on father	.33		0–1
Age 18–35	.42		0–1
Age 36–55	.49		0–1
Age 56–79	.09		0–1
Parental marriage intact	.57		0–1
Parent repartnered	.03		0–1
Parent lives alone	.43		0–1
Parental conflict	1.90	2.00	0–10
Family cohesion	11.10	2.83	0–16
Partnered	.84		0–1
Parent	.18		0–1
Non-response selfcompletion questionnaire	.08		0–1

Note.
Analyses based on weighted data.
[a]0 for ties living in same postal code area.

Table 2 provides information on contact, solidarity, conflict, and relationship quality. 55% of the adult children in the high contact sample see their parents once a week; 11% have contact on a daily basis. Children are more likely to give practical support (housework and odd jobs) to their parents than to receive it from them. Conflicts are relatively infrequent and the perceived relationship quality is relatively positive: 90% rates the relationship "good" or "very good".

In general, the characteristics of high contact ties are comparable to those of the full sample of parent–child relationships. We only mention the main differences. In the main sample, the mean age of the adult children (46 years) and the geographical distance (38 km.) are significantly higher. Furthermore, in the full sample a lower proportion of parents (33%) are in intact marriages (a higher proportion are widowed). Main sample adult children generally show higher levels of social isolation (2.92) and lower levels of family cohesion (10.5). A lower proportion (70%) of children in the main sample have a partner. Finally, a higher proportion (over 20%) rates the relationship with their parent as "not great" or "reasonable". It is not surprising to find some positive selectivity in our group of high contact ties regarding intactness of partner relationships, family cohesion, and relationship quality. Nevertheless, we feel the high-contact sample is heterogeneous enough to distinguish positive from negative ambivalent ties.

Typology of parent–child relationships

Table 3 shows the results of the LCA. The optimal number of parent–child relationship types turns out to be four (see

Table 2
Contact, solidarity, conflict, and relationship quality: descriptive statistics (percentages) ($N = 2694$).

	Once a week	Few times a week	Daily	
Face-to-face contact	55	34	11	
	Not at all	Once or twice	Several times	
Solidarity				
Help housework given	47	24	29	
Help odd jobs given	32	35	33	
Help housework received	70	15	15	
Help odd jobs received	58	23	19	
Conflict				
Material issues	85	12	3	
Personal issues	86	11	3	
	Not great	Reasonable	Good	Very good
Relationship quality	2	8	42	48

Note.
Viewed from the perspective of the adult child.
Analyses based on weighted data.

Table A.1 in Appendix A for details on model fit). As can be seen in the top row of Table 3, 33% of parent–child dyads are of the first type, 32% are of the second, 24% of the third, and 11% are of the fourth type. These percentages are the cumulative probabilities of all parent–child dyads of belonging to the respective types. The coefficients in the columns of types 1 to 4 indicate the probability that a dyad is characterized by specific dimensions of solidarity, conflict, and relationship quality, under the condition that the dyad is of that type. For example, there is a 68% probability that the child supports the parent with housework in Type 2 parent–child dyads, and a 10% probability of having conflicts about personal issues.

A first conclusion is that analyzing solidarity and conflict simultaneously among high contact ties reveals a nuanced picture of intergenerational relationships: not all parents and children who meet often exchange much support, have no conflict, and have high quality relationships. The Type 1 relationships can be denoted as *close-distant* (CD) ties: high contact frequency is combined with a relatively low level of solidarity and almost no conflict. This type of relationship can be characterized as one where children and parents regularly spend time together on an obligatory basis, just as socially or emotionally distant friends.

Table 3
Latent class analysis of parent-child relationships (probabilities) ($N = 2694$).

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4
	Close-distant (CD)	Positive Balanced Ambivalent (PBA)	Positive Dependent Ambivalent (PDA)	Negative Ambivalent (NA)
%	33	32	24	11
Solidarity				
Help housework given	1	68	99	47
Help odd jobs given	41	67	88	61
Help housework received	13	65	11	16
Help odd jobs received	34	82	06	35
Conflict				
Material issues	2	12	11	28
Personal issues	3	10	9	50
Relationship quality				
Not great	0	0	0	9
Reasonable	5	1	4	39
Good	50	30	48	47
Very good	45	69	47	5

Note.
Analyses based on weighted data.

The probability of exchanging practical support (housework and odd jobs) and conflict is generally on the high side for Type 2, Type 3, and Type 4. In almost 67% of all ties between parents and adult children, who meet at least on a weekly basis, solidarity and at least average conflict go together. However, Type 2 shows high probabilities for support in both directions. Both Type 3 and 4 show a high probability of support mainly towards the parent, although the probability of support in Type 3 is much higher. Another important distinction is the probability of conflict: low for Type 2 and Type 3, and high for Type 4. Finally, relationship quality helps to distinguish the 3 types: The probability for the best relationship quality is highest in Type 2, followed by Type 3 and Type 4. Given the differences, we assign the label *positive balanced ambivalent (PBA)* to Type 2. In the Type 3 ties, the parent is the main beneficiary and is dependent on the adult child. We assign the label *positive dependent ambivalent* (PDA). Finally, given the relatively low probability of support exchange and high probability for conflict and poor relationship quality, we assign the label *negative ambivalent* (NA) to Type 4 ties. This confirms our claim that ambivalence can have positive and negative implications. Moreover, ambivalence generally has positive implications, contrary to what is suggested in most work on intergenerational ambivalence.

Characteristics of the four types of parent–child relationships

Table 4 shows the results of the MNLM with the use of marginal effects, which reveal the relative importance of the independent variables in distinguishing different types of high contact parent–child relationships. Of the exit options, social isolation and family size turn out to be distinguishing features. Socially isolated children are less likely to be part of

Table 4
Characteristics of the four types of parent–child relationships: marginal effects of multinomial logistic regression ($N = 2694$; pseudo $R^2 = .15$).

	Close-distant	Positive Balanced Ambivalent (PBA)	Positive Dependent Ambivalent (PDA)	Negative Ambivalent (NA)
Assertiveness	−.00	.00	.00	−.00
Social isolation	.00	−.02**	−.00	.01**
Family obligations	−.01*	.00	.00	−.00
Number of siblings	.03**	−.03**	.02**	−.00
Geographic distance (km)	.02	−.01	.01	−.00
Male	.12**	−.11**	.01	−.02
Reporting on father	.06	−.05	−.04	.03
Age 18–35 (Ref: 36–55)	.04	.16**	−.20**	.00
Age 56–79 (Ref: 36–55)	.06	−.25**	.15*	.03
Parental marriage intact (Ref: lives alone)	.10*	.07*	−.12**	−.04*
Parent repartnered (Ref: lives alone)	.13	.04	−.14**	−.02
Parental conflict	−.02**	−.00	−.03**	.01**
Family cohesion	.00	.01*	.01**	−.01**
Partnered	.04	−.06*	.03	−.00
Parent	.05	−.03	−.03	.01
Non-response selfcompletion questionaire	−.02	−.04	.00	.06*

Note.
The coefficients for each variable do not always sum up to 0 due to rounding errors.
*$p < .05$;**$p < .01$.

positive balanced ambivalent ties, and more likely to be part of negative ambivalent ties. Those from larger families are more likely to be part of close-distant and positive dependent ambivalent ties, and less likely to be part of positive balanced ambivalent ties. Strong family obligations are least likely in close-distant ties. Table 4 also shows that the four types of parent–child relationships are patterned by gender and age. Sons are more likely to be in close-distant ties, and less likely to be in positive balanced ambivalent ties. Young adults are more likely to be in positive balanced ambivalent ties, but less likely to be in positive dependent ambivalent ties. The opposite holds for adult children who have passed middle age. The partner status of parents and children are additional distinguishing features. Adult children whose parents have remarried are less likely to be in positive dependent ambivalent ties. For adult children with parents who are in an intact marriage, the likelihood of being in close-distant or positive balanced ambivalent ties is greater, but the likelihood of being in positive dependent ambivalent or negative ambivalent ties is smaller. For adult children whose parents are in a new relationship, the likelihood of being in positive dependent ties is smaller. Having experienced parental conflict while young, is another distinguishing feature: the likelihood of being in close-distant or positive dependent ties is smaller, but the likelihood of being in negative-ambivalent ties is greater. Adult children who describe their families as cohesive, are more likely to be in positive balanced ambivalent and positive dependent ambivalent ties, and less likely to be in negative ambivalent ties. Partnered adult children are less likely to be in positive balanced ambivalent ties. Finally, those who failed to return the self-completion questionnaire are not evenly distributed across relationship types. They are most likely to be in negative ambivalent ties.

Our research questions focus on ambivalent relationships. The close-distant ties are not characterized by ambivalence (given the virtual absence of conflict), and therefore we do not include these relationships in subsequent analyses. Our hypotheses on exit options can best be tested by comparing the negative ambivalent (NA) with the positive balanced ambivalent (PBA) and positive ambivalent (PDA) relationships respectively. This is what we did in the following two logistic regression analyses.

Negative Ambivalent (NA) versus Positive Balanced Ambivalence (PBA)

In Table 5, we present the results of the comparison of the negative ambivalent (NA) with the positive balanced ambivalent (PBA). We estimated the full model, and also did so separately by gender. We did not estimate the separate models by life phase because the numbers in the oldest age group were too small.

Assertiveness, as indicator of the ability to see exit options does not seem to be important for ending up in either a PDA or NA relationship. As Table 5 shows, there is an effect of the

Table 5
Negative (NA) versus Positive Balanced Ambivalent (PBA) relationships by gender: logistic regression (odds ratio's).

	All	Sons	Daughters
Assertiveness	.97	.96	.96
Social isolation	1.14**	1.07	1.17**
Family obligations	.95*	.94	.95
Number of siblings	1.08	1.12	1.06
Geographic distance (km)	.97	.93	.98
Male	1.23	—	—
Reporting on father	2.16**	4.59**	1.76*
Age 18–35 (Ref: 36–55)	.53**	.53	.51**
Age 56–79 (Ref: 36–55)	10.39**	4.99*	14.56**
Parental marriage intact (Ref: lives alone)	.64	.11	1.03
Parent repartnered (Ref: lives alone)	.45**	.18**	.61
Parental conflict	1.19**	1.20**	1.18**
Family cohesion	.85**	.88*	.84**
Partnered	1.10	1.33	.99
Parent	1.34	1.87	1.13
Non-response selfcompletion questionaire	2.13**	1.53	2.36**
N	1,090	319	771
Pseudo R^2	.19	.22	.20

*$p < .05$;**$p < .01$.

decreasing availability of exits: Socially isolated adult children, especially daughters, are more likely to be in a negative ambivalent tie. Family obligations, as indicator of normative barriers, decrease rather than increase the likelihood of a NA instead of a PBA relationship. An alternative explanation may be that in high contact ties, family obligations form no *barrier* but rather a *buffer* for regular pushes and pulls in intense family relationships. Finally, the blockage of exits (the number of siblings or geographic distance) does not play a role in distinguishing PBA from NA ambivalent ties. We find interesting gender differences though.

As Table 5 shows, there is a much higher likelihood of having a negative ambivalent bond with fathers than with mothers. Moreover, father/son dyads show a higher likelihood of being negatively ambivalent compared to mother/son bonds. Father/daughter relationships are almost twice as likely to be negatively ambivalent than mother/daughter bonds. These findings are not consistent with the claim that women have the most intense bond of all parent–child relationships (Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004; Willson et al., 2003) and therefore are at risk of having strained relationships. However, the claim does seem to be confirmed if life phase is taken into account: Among daughters, NA instead of PBA is much more likely with increasing age than among sons. This finding is consistent with the idea that if caring becomes heaviest and least rewarding – in case the elderly parents must depend on support – women in midlife pay the highest price in the sense of relationship strains (George, 1986; Greenfield & Marks, 2006; Lang, 2004; Rosenthal, 1985).

Negative Ambivalent (NA) versus Positive Dependent Ambivalence (PDA)

In Table 6, we present the results of the comparison of the negative ambivalent (NA) with the positive dependent ambivalent (PDA). We estimated the full model, and did so separately by gender and life phase. We only report the results of the hypothesized effects and of the control variables that were statistically significant.

Again, assertiveness does not affect the likelihood of a negative ambivalent relationship. The availability of exits does, however: more socially isolated adult children, especially daughters, find themselves more often in a negative ambivalent tie. Again, contrary to our expectations, family obligations prevent high contact ties from ending up in negative ambivalent relationships. Regarding the blockage of exits, only the number of siblings has an effect on distinguishing between PDA and NA ambivalent ties: having more siblings is conducive to having ambivalent relationships in which the parent is more dependent on support, especially among middle aged daughters. Again, we find interesting gender and age differences.

Like in the NA/PBA comparison, NA instead of PDA is much more likely in the relationship between fathers and sons than in any other gender combination. The life phase is also important but in an opposite direction: NA instead of PDA ties are much more likely among young adult children and their parents, than among the old. In the “non normal expectable” (Neugarten, 1969) situation, where a father is highly dependent on a young adult child (aged 18–35), the odds are high (3.49) that the quality of the ambivalent tie is poor. An explanation is that young children often are neither prepared nor very eager to support their parents (yet) (Cancian & Oliker, 2000; Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Though daughters may be better prepared for the role as kinkeeper, in later life they have a three times higher likelihood to be in a negative instead of a positive dependent ambivalent tie than sons (.32).

Conclusion

Simultaneously investigating solidarity and conflict has become an important research challenge in studying the complexities of adult child–parent bonds (Bengtson et al., 1996; Katz et al., 2004; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006; Ward, 2008). Our study combines the solidarity/conflict model with the concept of intergenerational ambivalence and classic sociological ideas on cohesion in close ties (Simmel, 1904; Coser 1956). We challenge the common idea that the implications for relationship quality of solidarity are always positive, whereas those of conflict are always negative. We use representative data of adult children and parents with high levels of contact (weekly or more; $N = 2694$), since most theoretical

Table 6
Negative (NA) vs. Positive Dependent Ambivalent (PDA) relationships by gender and life phase: logistic regression (odds ratio's).

	All	Sons	Daughters	Child 18–35	Child 36–55	Child 56–79
Assertiveness	.96	.99	.95	.91	.97	1.04
Social isolation	1.08*	1.07	1.09*	1.11	1.08	1.08
Family obligations	.96*	.95	.96	.98	.96	.96
Number of siblings	.87**	.91	.86**	.98	.84**	.88
Geographic distance (km)	.93	.90	.94	.99	.96	.84
Male	.79			.52	.93	.32*
Reporting on father	1.58	3.41**	1.05	3.13*	1.59	.20
Age 18–35 (Ref: 36–55)	3.49**	2.78**	3.99**			
Age 56 – 79 (Ref: 36–55)	.72	.45	.86			
Parental conflict	1.28**	1.35**	1.25**	1.28**	1.28**	1.38*
Family cohesion	.86**	.88*	.85**	.79**	.86**	.84
N	922	344	578	198	562	146
Pseudo R^2	.19	.21	.19	.22	.14	.20

*$p < .05$;**$p < .01$.
Note.
Findings controlled for partner and parental status, marital history parent, non response selfcompletion questionnaire (none if them were significant).

progress can be expected by analyzing solidarity, conflict, and relationship quality in "active" relationships.

Three conclusions can be drawn. First, in high contact ties, ambivalence is not always perceived negatively but is more often perceived as something positive. In positive ambivalent relationships, conflict has a normal (i.e., average) level. This finding confirms the idea that both solidarity (e.g. Bengtson et al., 2002) and conflict (e.g., Simmel, 1904) are bonding elements within parent–child ties. If we want to improve our knowledge on why some parent–child relationships are cohesive and satisfying ("pure", like in Giddens (1991)), whereas others are stressful (e.g., George, 1986), solidarity and conflict must both be considered.

Second, about one tenth of the Dutch parents and children who at least meet on a weekly basis have negative ambivalent relationships: they support each other, but nevertheless have conflicts and report poor relationship quality. This nuances Homans' (1958) idea that ties always become stronger if partners have more contact and exchange higher levels of support.

A third conclusion is that reduced exit options contribute to negative ambivalence in close relationships (Smelser, 1998). Those who are socially isolated and thus have few exit options via alternative relationships are more likely to end up in negative ambivalent ties. Furthermore, having a smaller number of siblings also increases the likelihood of being part of negative ambivalent ties. Not all our indicators of exit options showed the expected effects on negative ambivalence, however. Assertiveness, as an indicator of the personal ability to see exit options did not play a role. Neither did geographic proximity. A premise in our theoretical model is that proximity makes it difficult for people to avoid one another. Our findings suggest that another mechanism might also be at play: proximity enhances contact opportunities and reduced the strain associated with parental support-giving. Future work should attempt to unravel the conditions under which proximity is positively and those under which proximity is negatively associated with relationship quality.

Contrary to expectations, those with strong family obligations were more likely to be part of positive ambivalent relationships rather than negative ambivalent relationships. Apparently, adhering to the view that family members should support one another does not operate as a barrier against exiting, but rather should be seen as a buffer against intense pushes and pulls in high contact family relationships. Here we have a confirmation of theoretical suggestions on the bonding impact of norms in family relationships (Coleman, 1990; Hechter, 1987).

Distinctions by age and gender gave interesting insights into the nature of intergenerational ambivalence, since they support *and* modify earlier findings. They also corroborate our initial idea that one should distinguish between positive and negative ambivalent ties. Young adults are more likely to be in a positive balanced ambivalent tie, whereas older adult children are more likely to be in a positive dependent ambivalent tie, caring for their ageing parents. Our results confirm Connidis and McMullin's (2002) claim about the more difficult position of caring daughters in families, given that they are more likely to find themselves in negative ambivalent relationships, especially if the parent is rather old. In contrast to findings from earlier research, we did not find the greatest negativity in mothers' relationships (Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). In all life phases, fathers are much more likely to find themselves in negative ambivalent relationships than mothers. Men's role has largely been neglected in research on intergenerational ambivalence and needs more attention.

The usefulness of distinguishing positive from negative ambivalence becomes apparent in our finding that the likelihood of negative, instead of positive ambivalent ties increases if exchange patterns do not coincide with the "normal expectable" state of interdependence between parents and adult children (cf. Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Hagestad, 2002). A "non normal expectable" situation emerges if supportive middle aged daughters receive relatively much support from their elderly parent: daughters are not only more likely to have relationships of a poor relationship quality than sons who are in a dependent position, but this likelihood is much higher in the balanced situation. Another "non normal expectable" state of interdependence is the situation in which parents (especially fathers) must rely on their young adult children's (especially their sons') support. The implication is that if parent–child relationships are atypical or deviate from social prescriptions, the likelihood is much higher that the "certain balance" in the ambivalent tie is disturbed. Poor relationship quality is often the result.

Discussion

The moderate response rate is a limitation of our study. Analyses of the representativity of the NKPS-sample (Dykstra et al., 2005) revealed an under-representation of men and of young adults, and an over-representation of women with children living at home. Residents of highly urban and highly rural areas are also under-represented in the sample, a pattern often seen in survey research. We do not think that the typology of child–parent relationships is seriously affected by the selective response. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the selectivity affects the distribution of relationship types as is, for example, evident in an over-representation of high quality relationships in the NKPS-sample (Dykstra et al., 2005).

Our results suggest that social policy makers emphasizing the need for informal care should more often consider the possibility that care giving can lead to psychological distress for the beneficiary (Morée, 2005). Ageing parents may want to be more independent from their children than ever: They expect less support in old age than their own children report to be willing to give in case of need (Van Gaalen, 2005). In addition, in public debates on the balance between formal and informal care, greater attention should be paid to the circumstances of ageing men and caring sons. Socio-demographic developments increase the likelihood that parents do not have daughters but must rely on (maybe less competent) sons.

Future work should attempt to better capture variations in the dependency structure between parents and children, for instance by including more detailed information on the health status of the aging parent. In addition, scholars should try to incorporate characteristics of the sibling network, given that sibling-parent relationships are highly interdependent. Finally, the typology described here characterizes child–parent relationships as they exist at a particular point in time. Although our life phase perspective alluded to some of the dynamics, future research efforts should be directed at

studying shifts in the typology over time. For example, it is of high interest to understand under which conditions relationships shift between positive and negative ambivalent ties.

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Appendix A

Table A.1
Model fit for the optimal number of classes in the LCA.

Number	*Df*[a]	L^{2}[b]	*p*-value	BIC[c]
1	9	1213.83	.00	−722.33
2	17	842.82	.00	−1030.37
3	25	446.64	.00	−1363.59
4	33	305.33	.00	−1441.94
5	41	251.10	.04	−1433.20

[a] *Df* = degrees of freedom.

[b] L^{2} = likelihood ratio statistic.

[c] BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion.

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